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Declaration of The Left Looks at 1996 Independents

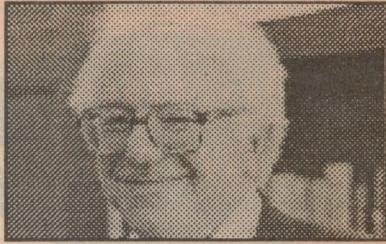
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BERNIE SANDERS TALKS TO SOCIALIST

Representative Bernie Sanders is Vermont's only member of the U.S. House of Representatives; he is also the only independent, as well as an avowed socialist. A four-term former mayor of Burlington, Sanders is now serving his third term in the House (surprising the pundits who said he would not survive the Republican coup of November '94), after capturing the votes of Vermont's rural and historically conservative farmers, who have come to know him as a genuine voice for the working people of Vermont. He has been a consistent voice for progressive issues, founding the House Progressive Caucus, and he just recently cast the deciding vote which stopped the 20 billion dollar Mexican bailout from going through. Socialist editor Andrew Hammer recently spoke with Sanders in his Washington office.

I wanted to ask you about your role in founding the Progressive Caucus, and how you see its prospects for resisting the new Right... whether you see it as a force for eventually creating independent political leverage, or simply leverage for progressive issues.

Well, I was elected in 1990, and one of the things that struck me was that the [Congressional] Black Caucus had played an enormously important role in this Congress for many years and continues to play that role today as the progressive voice in Congress. When I was Mayor of Burlington, I used to read the Black Caucus budgets and statements because that was clearly the most sensible thing coming from the Congress.

However, it did not seem sensible to me that the only progressive voice coming out of Congress should be the black voice; you had many Hispanics, you had whites who also had a progressive vision of what this country should be and what role the Congress should be playing, and it seemed to me that we would all be more effective if we worked more closely together. So when I was elected, I spoke to Ron Dellums, Pete DeFazio, Lane Evans, and Maxine Waters, and we sat down and became the nucleus of what is the Progressive Caucus. Since that point it has grown to 46 members.

In my view, it is very important for the progressive members of Congress not only to lead the fight against Gingrich and the Contract With America, but also to try to educate ordinary Americans as to what is going on here in Washington. I do not have an illusion, however, that the struggle for a new America, a democratic America, is going to be won here in Congress

alone; it clearly is not. I think that simultaneously, obviously, we need to see an enormous amount of grassroots organizing, we need to see the revitalization of the labor movement, we need to see empowerment in local communities, so forth and so on. But we do have an important role to play here.

In Vermont the role that I'm trying to play, is to develop a strong grassroots effort... in the city of Burlington we have for all intents and purposes a third party; the mayor now is a progressive, we have 7 out of 14 members on the city council, so in Burlington, the state's largest city, we do have what amounts to a third party. Throughout the state, we don't have the party but what we do have is the Vermont Progressive Coalition, which for the first time, has finally been able to hire a full-time organizer with an office in Burlington. So the hats that I wear are many, and between here and Vermont I have many roles.

In the last election, you defied the experts who had figured you as a goner by winning the rural conservative vote. Can you talk a bit about how you built this populist approach in light of the fact that people know you're a socialist?

Well, in Vermont you're not really dealing with a national audience, you're dealing with a small state where many people know you are. I was Mayor of Burlington for eight years, so I have the advantage of being able to repel labels because people say, "Well, he was elected Mayor four times and this is what he did. You can call him anything you want, but in fact he radically changed the infrastructure of the city – he started women's programs, and youth programs, and arts programs, was very active for small business and helped develop a people-oriented waterfront..." so when you look at the concrete achievements people say, "yeah, call it whatever you want, those were the results; taxes were down, progressive taxes were developed, and good things happened in the city." So that makes it harder for our critics to use labels against us because people can see the reality.

I also think that in Vermont what I try to do is focus very much on class issues; if you check my voting record you will find out that it's 100% environmental, 100% gay, 100% women, and those are not my major issues. I would argue that there are very few if any members of Congress who continue to bang away at class issues, when in fact this afternoon I'll be on the floor of the House trying to eliminate the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, which is a very good example of corporate welfare, where we're spending a very substantial amount of

money helping the largest corporations in America downsize enormously, putting hundreds of thousands of workers out on the street, while they're riding on federal money to invest abroad. I don't know that there's anyone here [in Congress] that talks more about the gap between rich and poor, the problem of lowering wages for working people, the increase in poverty that's happening to our children. You asked about how we did in the rural areas of Vermont; the vast majority of people in those areas are middle income working people, and they should be supportive of what I stand for, because I'm fighting for their issues.

I want to ask you what it's been like on a personal level, being a socialist in Congress.

Well... for better or for worse, and I'm not sure which, most members of Congress, at least in this day and age, are reasonably hospitable. I understand that when someone like Ron Dellums first came here twenty-some years ago, the hostility towards radicals was very difficult. I have found with very few exceptions people being hospitable. There's been some red-baiting, which seems to be increasing a little bit lately – I was deeply honored at being attacked by Rush Limbaugh as "Comrade Sanders," and then there was this guy [Randy] Cunningham [R-CA] who made the remark "Sit down, socialist!" – on the other hand, given the context of this institution, I've been treated quite kindly by the Democratic leadership. But I have to tell you, in many ways, a lot of what goes on here is very depressing. Every day there are terrible, terrible things that go on, especially now with Gingrich as Speaker.

How do we go about building and sustaining a grassroots electoral movement that can address people's issues, and that will offer the type of alternatives that will bring them out to the polls?

Well primarily, I think the reason that I've been successful in Vermont is that we have done what I think should be done around the country, and that is focus in on our own communities. I am not sympathetic to a group of three people who announce the formation of the eighty-third third party which will bring power to all working people within the next two weeks.

To be successful politically requires a lot of hard work, but the most important thing you can do is to *knock on doors in your community*, and talk to real people, especially working people, low income people. You can't just say that everyone who's not sympathetic to every point on your agenda is a racist or a sexist, or an "evil white man" or an "evil white woman." I think that there is that tendency in the left, and it would probably shock people to know that I get a lot of support from veterans, despite the fact that I'm anti-war. We get a lot of support from gun owners, who happen to be working people who work 50-60 hours a week to support their families.

When I was mayor of Burlington, one of the requirements we had

was that our candidates for city council, without exception, was that they had to go out and knock on every door; if they couldn't do that, we really didn't want them as a candidate. Our candidates had to know their communities, know their neighborhoods, and be able to speak to the people.

I think that on the left, that seems to not happen very often. People can make wonderful speeches and write wonderful books, but they somehow just don't go out and talk to "real people" very often. Of course if they do that, they may not be happy with everything they hear, but that is the world that we're living in, and you have to deal with the world as it is.

What's next for you? You had considered running for the Senate, and some people have mentioned you as a possible independent Presidential candidate...

Sure, if they send in a check for 200 million dollars, we're ready



Photos: Socialist/Julie Lutz

to go... (laughter) There was a poll taken in Vermont which had me running just six points behind Senator Jeffords (R), and that prompted a lot of discussion about a possible run for the Senate. I chose not to run for a couple of reasons: obviously we don't have the kind of money and interests behind us that the Democrats and Republicans do, and that's a serious problem—on top of that Vermont is not a wealthy state, and we don't have a lot of wealthy supporters. So running against Jeffords would have required a herculean fundraising effort, and I just didn't think it was "do-able."

Second of all, which to some may seem to be a selfish reason, it is already very hard for someone with my politics to function in the House of Representatives, where you have a lot of niches that you can focus on. In my mind, to function in the Senate is an enormously difficult task psychologically; having to move in the middle and compromise every day with a Jesse Helms or a Strom Thurmond, is literally like being in a horrible marriage that you can't get out of. In the House the rules are such that you don't really have to deal with guys like that on a daily basis; in the Senate, you really do have to deal with that because one

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person can stop discussion on this thing or that, and I don't know mentally how well I would have survived six years of having to go to bed with Jesse Helms every night. It's not something that I would really look forward to.

How do you see the future for working people in this country, in the context of the changes in the global economy, the consolidation of global capital?...

I can simply say that I'm extraordinarily worried about the future of this country, for a couple of reasons. Obviously the current nature of the global economy, with the ability of capital to stunt and exploit third world countries, is a frightening reality. How we stop that is an enormously difficult question.

Second of all, automation is wreaking havoc on one sector of the economy, with the laying off of huge numbers of workers and wages being driven down.

Thirdly, corporate control of the media has created a situation where the vast majority of the American people have not the vaguest idea of what's going on.

I happen to believe that one of the most serious problems, and the reason why we have things like "militias," is that people are hurting very, very badly. Their standard of living is in decline, they look to the future for their kids, and they are rightfully very worried... they are anxious about their jobs, which are often now becoming part-time jobs... they can't afford to send their kids to college... So they're getting hurt badly, they're working many more hours than they used to, and no one has explained to them why that's happening. So what you have is a situation where the average working person is working longer hours for

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to meet school attendance requirements without making any inquiry into the reason for non-attendance or offering services to help resolve the problem, or to reduce aid for the lack of immunizations without taking any steps to improve access to immunizations.

Recent actions in state general assistance programs where they are free of any federal statutory requirements offer a sense of what might be expected in a standardless block grant program. For example, in the last five years. Michigan completely terminated general assistance to everyone other than families with children and severely disabled individuals, while Ohio and Illinois limited aid for all those not considered "seriously disabled" to 6 out of 12 months.

Maintenance of national standards and protection of individual entitlements are not inconsistent with state discretion. For example, states still control one of the most fundamental

lower wages, and everything being equal, his or her kid is going to have a bleaker future than he or she has experienced. But no one is explaining to them what's happening. Therefore, the Rush Limbaughs and the Newt Gingriches of the world are able to scapegoat very effectively, and blame poor people as the cause of our problems, or welfare, immigrants, blacks, women, and so forth and so on. And they can be successful because it is not going to be Rush Limbaugh who explains to the ordinary American why his or her standard of living is in decline. Television does not deal with this issue at all. So you have a massive censorship regarding the economic crisis in America. Pick up the papers today, and you'll read about the economy being booming; then people say, "The economy is booming?" They don't quite understand what's going on; we're in the midst of one of the most severe economic crises in the history of the United States, and people, middle class and working class, are becoming poorer and poorer, and the future is enormously frightening.

That reality is like waking up in the morning and finding that your house is not there but not understanding that a hurricane took it away... if a hurricane took away your house, at least you have an intellectual understanding of what happened. There is a hurricane, searing through this country... people are in terrible fear and worry, but again no one is explaining this to them.

One of the roles that we try to play with the Progressive Caucus is to try to get the word out to working people that "No, you're not the only person who's working longer and harder for less... No, it's not your fault, don't get drunk and blame yourself because your job went to Mexico. The rich are getting richer and they're taking your jobs... their profits are escalating."

That's a very important role that has to be played. What I think is positive is that people want to hear a radical analysis, and that's what we're trying to do. ○

program aspects, the determination of benefit levels and need standards, and largely control the design of the JOBS program that is supposed to increase employability among families receiving aid. There is no barrier to expansion of state discretion in areas where it is shown to be warranted.

National criteria and protection of eligibility rights have certainly not assured adequate aid for poor children nationwide but they have offered at least some protection against the possibility of short sighted state policies that seek to eliminate the problem of poverty by simply trying to drive the poor to other states, a possibility that seems all too real in the current climate. To withdraw the federal presence from programs to aid needy children except as an inadequate funding source would be to abandon a national commitment to children made sixty years ago, and would be a repudiation of any national responsibility for how we as a society treat our most vulnerable members. ○

Christopher Lamb is a staff member of the Center on Social Welfare Policy and Law. This article was originally printed in the Center's newsletter, Welfare Reform News.